

STRATEGIC GOAL

4 *Contribute to the public health, emergency management, socioeconomic well-being, and history of the Nation.*

VA will continue to be involved in the Nation's preparedness for an emergency, including response to terrorism or natural disaster. VA will support the public health of the Nation as a whole through medical research, medical education and medical training, as well as through education, vocational rehabilitation, and home loan programs. VA will also preserve the memory and sense of patriotism of the Nation by maintaining national cemeteries as national shrines and by hosting patriotic and commemorative ceremonies and events.

This table identifies estimates of the total resources devoted to this strategic goal and its associated objectives:

Resources by Goal and Objective	FY 2002 Obligations	% of Total VA Resources
Total VA Resources	\$58,899	
Strategic Goal		
Contribute to the public health, emergency management, socioeconomic well-being, and history of the Nation.	\$943	1.6%
Objective		
<i>Improve the Nation's preparedness for response to war, terrorism, national emergencies, and natural disasters by developing plans and taking actions to ensure continued service to veterans as well as support to national, state, and local emergency management and homeland security efforts.</i>	\$0	0.0%
<i>Advance VA medical research and development programs that address veterans' needs, with an emphasis on service-connected injuries and illnesses, and contribute to the Nation's knowledge of disease and disability.</i>	\$443	0.8%
<i>Sustain partnerships with the academic community that enhance the quality of care to veterans and provide high quality educational experiences for health care trainees.</i>	\$425	0.7%
<i>Enhance the socioeconomic well-being of veterans, and thereby the Nation and local communities, through veterans' benefits; assistance programs for small, disadvantaged, and veteran-owned businesses; and other community initiatives.</i>	<\$1M	0.0%
<i>Ensure that national cemeteries are maintained as shrines dedicated to preserving our Nation's history, nurturing patriotism, and honoring the service and sacrifice veterans have made.</i>	\$75	0.1%

Two key performance measures enable us to gauge progress in achieving this strategic goal:

- Institutional Review Board compliance with NCQA accreditation and maintenance, as

appropriate, of AAALAC or NRC accreditation or certification.

- Appearance of national cemeteries.

Objective

Improve the Nation's preparedness for response to war, terrorism, national emergencies, and natural disasters by developing plans and taking actions to ensure continued service to veterans as well as support to national, state, and local emergency management and homeland security efforts.

Improve Response in the Event of National Emergency

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent report of VA's Emergency Preparedness Working Group, the Department has consolidated its efforts to improve the Nation's response in the event of a national emergency or natural disaster. Although there was no 'key' performance measure in place during 2002, there were many ongoing activities toward the goal of improving VA's response in the event of national emergency.

Means and Strategies

On March 20, 2002, the VA Secretary approved formation of an Office of Operations, Security and Preparedness to consolidate Department-level emergency preparedness, readiness operations, and security and law enforcement activities in one organization. This office has in effect been a "virtual" one, working so far with existing resources and "detailed" staff. Accountability for an overarching Departmental emergency preparedness framework has resided with the Secretary's staff. VA has deployed the following strategies to support this objective.

- Established a 24/7 Readiness Operations Center, with alternate sites to serve as back-up in case of a crisis resulting in closure or disabling of Central Office.
- Established a Crisis Response Team with at least twice-weekly meetings to monitor, evaluate, and respond to events that do not require the activation of the VA Continuity of Operations (COOP) Plan teams, and to ensure continued multi-administration focus on emergency preparedness and readiness operations.
- Established out-of-sector mirror site to ensure continuity of executive leadership.
- Formalized the official order of succession to the position of Secretary of Veterans Affairs.
- Produced satellite broadcasts that aired nationally at VA facilities to train staff that might be involved in treating victims of a terrorist attack.
- Continued to conduct exercises. Exercises have included weapons of mass destruction cache movement command and control involving all VA sites; communications exercise involving all VA sites; COOP table top exercise with VA executives; Olympic Games readiness communications and coordination exercise; COOP plan update exercise for VA emergency planners; a Crisis Response Team deployment at the field Readiness Operations Center; and an exercise to validate the operational capability of an alternate headquarters site.
- Procured 39 out of a planned 143 pharmaceutical caches for VA medical centers to enable continued care for VA patients and staff if supply is disrupted as the result of an attack.
- Developed a plan to procure personal protective and decontamination equipment to protect the medical staff and others at risk of exposure to chemical, biological, or radiological exposure so that they can continue to treat veterans and

others who may need treatment at a VA facility in the event of a catastrophic incident.

- Commenced planning for a decontamination program equipped to handle both small numbers and mass casualties, should the need arise. This plan will include initial and sustainment training.
- Developed a Departmentwide color-coded homeland security threat level response system for VA, to include VA police departments.
- Conducted a comprehensive review of physical security of buildings across the Department.

Crosscutting Activities

VA has been involved with several federal organizations in order to help achieve this objective. Senior leadership participates in Homeland Security and Deputies Council meetings, and VA is also represented on Homeland Security Policy Coordinating Committees and work groups. These groups include representatives from the Departments of Health and Human Services, Justice, Defense, and Energy; the Federal Emergency Management Agency; the new Department of Homeland Security; and others. They meet regularly to establish governmental

policy regarding such issues as response and recovery, training and exercises, research and development, and medical and public health preparedness. VA has also expanded partnerships with private organizations such as the American Red Cross.

VA experts have collaborated with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in defining a proposed VA role in a smallpox vaccination program and have supported HHS in forming the USA Freedom Corps Medical Reserve Corps cadre of volunteer health care professionals to provide medical care in case of an attack.

VA also continues to maintain capability to provide contingency medical support to DoD and to provide support to other agencies as required under the Federal Response Plan.

Data Source and Validation

Our 2003 performance data will be derived from training and exercise data to be collected on a periodic basis from VA's three administrations. They are responsible for primary data collection. Most exercises are conducted under the purview of the Office of Operations, Security and Preparedness, which maintains detailed records of all exercises and training.

Objective

Advance VA medical research and development programs that address veterans' needs, with an emphasis on service-connected injuries and illnesses, and contribute to the Nation's knowledge of disease and disability.

Performance Goal

Perform at 10 percent compliance of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) with National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) accreditation and maintenance, as appropriate, of Association for the Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC) or Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) accreditation or certification.

Definition: *This measure ensures the compliance of research facilities/investigators with regulatory requirements and ensures the safety of research subjects. The numerator is the number of research programs that are reviewed and receive accreditation; the denominator is all research programs.*

Under the direction of the Office of Research and Development (ORD), VA's research portfolio of more than 2,500 projects has resulted in numerous discoveries that have improved the quality of health care for veterans and the American public. Virtually all VA research projects are directed toward health conditions relevant to the veteran population. While all VA research is relevant to veterans, the Designated Research Areas (DRA) are of particular importance to VHA's veteran patient population. The DRAs include aging, chronic diseases, mental illness, substance abuse, sensory loss, acute and traumatic injury, health services and systems, special populations, and military occupations/ environmental exposures.

ORD expanded its Quality Enhanced Research Initiative (QUERI) to include colorectal cancer (CRC). A joint effort by VA and the National Cancer Institute, the CRC QUERI is housed in the Minneapolis VA Medical Center and shares resources with The Center for Chronic Disease Outcomes Research, a VA Health Services Research Center of Excellence. Other research highlights can be found on page 21 under the Public Benefits Section.

VA achieved its 2002 goal for NCQA accreditation of the Department's Human Subjects Protection Programs. NCQA conducted 23 site visits during

Designated Research Area	Number of projects conducted in 2002
Acute & Traumatic Injury	170
Aging & Age-Related Changes	445
Chronic Diseases	1481
Health Services & Systems	219
Mental Illness	161
Military and Environmental Exposures	143
Sensory Disorders & Loss	82
Special (Underserved, High Risk Populations)	99
Substance Abuse, Addictive Disorders	132

Note: Preliminary figures.

2002, or slightly more than 20 percent, of all VA locations that conduct human research. VA received final results for all 23 sites during 2001 with 16 locations being accredited ‘with conditions’ and 4 sites not receiving accreditation. Of those four sites, two appeals are still pending and two appeals were denied. Currently, 15 percent of VA sites have been accredited compared to a goal of 10 percent.

VA and NCQA temporarily suspended this first-of-its-kind program in order to conduct quality improvement activities based on the experiences of the first 23 inspections. Both organizations agreed that the standards needed modification to help streamline the review process and to clarify selected requirements. As a result, NCQA released revised standards for public comment in September 2002 and updated the amended standards in November 2002. Accreditation site visits will resume this winter.

All 86 veterinary medical units within the VA research program are accredited by the AAALAC (100 percent of goal). NRC licensure is required for all facilities that utilize radioactive materials and/or radiation-producing devices for research or clinical purposes. Oversight of these licensing activities is the responsibility of VA’s National Health Physics Program, a component of the Office of Patient Care Services. The NRC issued licenses to all VA facilities requiring licensure (100 percent of goal).

Means and Strategies

VA complies with federal regulations whereby responsibility for protecting human subjects is assigned to three separate groups. First, investigators are responsible for conducting research in accordance with regulations. Second, institutions maintain oversight mechanisms, including local committees known as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). IRBs are responsible for reviewing both research proposals and ongoing research. Third, agencies are responsible for ensuring that their IRBs comply with applicable regulations and that they provide sufficient space and staff to accomplish their obligations.

The Department requires that each VA medical center (VAMC) engaged in research with human subjects establishes its own IRB or secures the services of another IRB at an affiliated university. ORD establishes the policies that promote the ethical conduct of research and manages the NCQA contract. The Office of Research Compliance and Assurance (ORCA) manages matters relating to the effectiveness of research protections, promotion of the ethical conduct of research, and the investigation of allegations of research impropriety.

Within VHA, VISNs must demonstrate full compliance with appropriate regulations in the following ways:

- Quarterly report re-accreditation reviews. Each VISN director is required to submit a quarterly report listing appropriate accreditation agencies for the Network’s research programs, including dates of such review and conclusions of those reviews.
- NCQA reviews. VISN directors are also required to report whether the Network is scheduled for an NCQA review and supply the dates of such review.
- Network director performance measures. Part of each Network director’s annual performance evaluation is based on the completion or outcome of various research compliance measures. This includes information about attainment of all necessary full accreditation and clearly defined plans for any new accreditation.

ORCA conducts Systematic Post-Accreditation Reviews (SP-AR) to address the situations at VAMCs when NCQA gives a “Not Accredited” designation. The SP-AR assesses the full scope and significance of the issues that relate to the performance of the VAMC’s Human Resource Participant Protection. The SP-AR report, including recommendations, is available 2 weeks after the team completes its on-site review. During the course of the on-site review, serious and egregious non-compliance with the regulations that protect

human research subjects may become apparent. In such instances, the Federal Wide Assurance of the facility is suspended until the site is again in compliance.

External Factors

No external factors hampered execution of the accreditation program. VA's contract with NCQA fulfills Department requirements and provides VA the flexibility necessary to strengthen human research participant protections. NCQA's 30-day comment period for its proposed performance standard revisions permitted the public to review them and to submit valuable feedback.

Crosscutting Activities

VA research is conducted subject to the regulations of many other Federal agencies as well as VA's own internal regulations. For example, human studies funded by pharmaceutical companies and conducted at VA facilities in support of a new drug or device application are subject to Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and oversight; studies funded by the National Institutes of Health and conducted in VA facilities are subject to the Department of Health and Human Services regulations and oversight.

VHA has issued a contract for external accreditation of human subjects programs to the NCQA, an independent, not-for-profit accrediting organization that is nationally renowned for its objective evaluations of health care organizations.

Within VHA, ORD is responsible for developing human studies policy in coordination with other federal research regulatory agencies. ORCA is responsible for enforcement activities with other federal research regulatory agencies, including the FDA and the HHS Office of Human Research Protections. As an example, the FDA has recognized the need to revise its reporting procedures for serious adverse events and has involved ORCA in the development of a clearer set of procedures and guidelines.

Data Source and Validation

Each VISN director is required to submit a quarterly report listing appropriate accreditation agencies for the Network's research programs, including dates of such review and conclusions of those reviews. Also, Network director performance evaluations include measures related to attaining appropriate accreditations. These accreditations are subject to verification by the accrediting agency.

Objective

Sustain partnerships with the academic community that enhance the quality of care to veterans and provide high quality educational experiences for health care trainees.

VA supports the public health of the Nation through medical education and training. One of the VA health care system's strategic objectives is to *Build Healthy Communities* by partnering with the academic community to provide clinical education experiences for medical residents and other health care trainees who successfully meet their learning

objectives and enhance the quality of care provided to veterans within the VA health care system. VA has affiliations with over 100 medical schools and over 1,200 educational institutions.

There are currently no key performance measures associated with this objective.

Objective

Enhance the socioeconomic well-being of veterans, and thereby the Nation and local communities, through veterans' benefits; assistance programs for small, disadvantaged, and veteran-owned businesses; and other community initiatives.

Our Nation has an obligation to provide servicemembers and veterans with the means to take advantage of the opportunities protected and preserved by their service. VA created a task force to identify ways of increasing the level of procurement and contract awards to veteran-owned small businesses and service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses. During 2002, VA made a concerted effort to improve performance in these areas over that of 2001. For example, through more aggressive outreach, improved data collection, and better identification of opportunities, we doubled awards to service-disabled veteran-owned small

businesses and, in addition, increased awards to veteran-owned small businesses.

VA promotes business ownership through its Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and the recently created Center for Veterans Enterprise. VA's program evaluation of the educational assistance programs demonstrated a positive return on investment of 2 to 1 in the form of increased income taxes for every program dollar spent.

There are currently no key performance measures associated with this objective.

Objective

Ensure that national cemeteries are maintained as shrines dedicated to preserving our Nation's history, nurturing patriotism, and honoring the service and sacrifice veterans have made.

Performance Goals

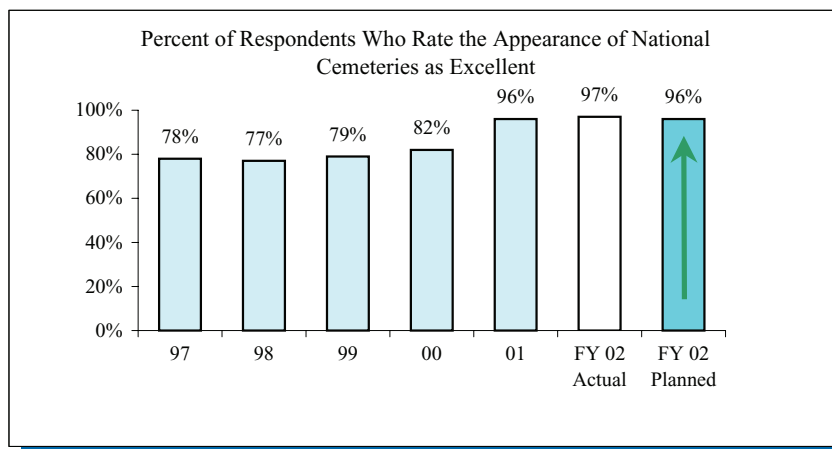
Increase the percent of respondents who rate national cemetery appearance as excellent to 96 percent by 2002.

Definition: *This measure is the number of survey respondents who agree or strongly agree that the overall appearance of the national cemetery is excellent divided by the total number of survey respondents, expressed as a percentage.*

The percentage of respondents who rate national cemetery appearance as excellent exceeded our planned performance goal in 2002. We achieved a 97 percent rating versus the goal of 96 percent. Each national cemetery exists as a national shrine, and as such, serves as an expression of the appreciation and respect of a grateful Nation for the service and sacrifice of its veterans. Each national shrine provides an enduring memorial to their service, as well as a dignified and respectful setting for their final rest.

National cemeteries also carry expectations of appearance that set them apart from private cemeteries. Our Nation is committed to create and maintain these sites as national shrines, transcending the provision of benefits to an individual. As national shrines, VA's cemeteries serve a purpose that continues long after burials have ceased and visits of families and loved ones have ended.

A national shrine is a place of honor and memory that declares to the visitor or family member who views it that, within its majestic setting, each and every veteran may find a sense of serenity, historic sacrifice, and nobility of purpose. Each visitor should depart feeling that the grounds, the gravesites, and the environs of the national cemetery are a beautiful and awe-inspiring tribute to those who gave much to preserve our Nation's freedom and way of life. A widow wrote that each time she visits her husband's grave in a VA national cemetery, she is in awe, and experiences a sense of peace and calmness at this "solemn national shrine."



Our Nation's veterans have earned the appreciation and respect not only of their friends and families but also of the entire country. National cemeteries are enduring testimonials to that appreciation and should be places to which veterans and their families are drawn for dignified burials and lasting memorials. Veterans and their families expect national cemeteries to have well-maintained gravesites, buildings, facilities, headstones and monuments.

Means and Strategies

To ensure the appearance of national cemeteries meets the standards our Nation expects of its national shrines, VA performs a wide variety of grounds management functions. In 2002, work continued on raising or realigning headstones to ensure uniform height and spacing. Soiled headstones were cleaned. In-ground gravesites (casket and cremain) received maintenance to prevent and correct ground sinkage. To preserve columbaria, VA cleaned stains from stone surfaces, maintained the caulking and grouting between the units, and repaired the surrounding walkways. While attending to these highly visible aspects of our national shrines, VA also maintained roads, drives, parking lots, and walks; painted buildings, fences, and gates; and repaired roofs, walls, and irrigation and electrical systems.

Cemetery acres that have been developed into burial areas, as well as land that is no longer in a natural state, require regular maintenance. In 2002, VA maintained over 6,900 developed acres and over 2.5 million graves.

To ascertain how our customers and stakeholders perceive the appearance of national cemeteries, VA seeks feedback through annual surveys and focus groups. This information is used to determine expectations for cemetery appearance as well as specific improvement opportunities and training needs. In 2001, VA developed a nationwide mail-out customer satisfaction survey, an improvement over the previous data collection instrument. The information gathered is used in the NCA strategic planning process to develop additional

strategies for improvement. VA will continue to conduct focus groups to collect data on stakeholder expectations and their level of satisfaction with the appearance of national cemeteries.

The Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, Public Law 106-117, directed VA to contract for an independent study to look at various issues related to the National Shrine Commitment and its focus on cemetery appearance. Volume 3: Cemetery Standards of Appearance, was published in March 2002. This report will serve as NCA's planning tool and as a reference guide to assist MSN directors, cemetery directors, and program managers in the task of reviewing and refining NCA operational standards and measures. This work has already begun. When complete, the directory of standards will be published and linked to statements of policy and operational descriptions of processes through directives and handbooks.

In August 2002, Volume 2: National Shrine Commitment was completed. This report identified the one-time repairs needed to ensure a dignified and respectful setting appropriate for each national cemetery. Recommendations to address deferred maintenance issues or preventive steps to minimize future maintenance costs were also identified. NCA will use the information to address repair and maintenance needs at its national cemeteries.

Contracts for National Shrine Commitment projects have been awarded and are underway at six national cemeteries: Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery in Texas; Golden Gate National Cemetery in California; Long Island National Cemetery in New York; Willamette National Cemetery in Oregon; Wood National Cemetery in Wisconsin; and Memphis National Cemetery in Tennessee. In 2002, over 180,000 headstones were raised and realigned, as well as cleaned where needed. In addition, 77,000 gravesites were renovated.

In a joint venture with VHA, national cemeteries provided therapeutic work opportunities to veterans receiving treatment in the Compensated Work Therapy/Veterans Industries program. This program provides veterans the opportunity to work for pay,

regain lost work habits, and learn new work skills while providing a supplemental workforce for the national cemeteries.

In 2002, numerous ceremonies and memorial services were held at national cemeteries to honor those who made the supreme sacrifice. More than 110,000 people attended Memorial Day ceremonies at VA national cemeteries across the Nation. America's veterans and their service to the Nation were honored at ceremonies that included military flyovers, honor guard demonstrations, and band performances. VA leaders, staff members, and designated representatives spoke at the ceremonies honoring America's veterans. Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery hosted a POW-MIA commemoration, which included a wreath-laying ceremony at the cemetery's POW-MIA flagpole, followed by an all-night vigil during which volunteers read the names of more than 1,600 MIAs from Ohio. Los Angeles National Cemetery welcomed more than 400 people to the 10th Annual Abraham Lincoln Remembrance Ceremony. The program included Civil War-era songs and the recitation of the Gettysburg Address.

External Factors

Maintaining the grounds, graves, and grave markers of national cemeteries as national shrines is influenced by many different factors. As time goes by, cemeteries experience a variety of environmental changes that may require extensive maintenance. Extremes in weather, such as excessive rain or drought, can result in or exacerbate sunken graves, sunken markers, soiled markers, inferior turf cover, and weathering of columbaria. For example, the 230-pound upright headstones and the 130-pound flat markers tend to settle over time and must be raised and realigned periodically. The frequency of this need varies depending on soil conditions and climate.

Crosscutting Activities

VA continued its partnerships with various civic organizations that provide volunteers and other participants to assist in maintaining the appearance of national cemeteries. An interagency agreement with the Bureau of Prisons provides for the use of selected prisoners to perform work at national cemeteries. This agreement provides a supplemental source of labor to assist in maintaining the national cemeteries.

Data Source and Validation

From 1996 through 2000, the source of data used to measure the appearance of national cemeteries was the NCA Visitor Comment Card. Since 2001, an annual nationwide mail survey, Survey of Satisfaction with National Cemeteries, has been NCA's primary source of customer satisfaction data. The survey collects data annually from family members and funeral directors who have recently received services from a national cemetery. To ensure sensitivity to the grieving process, NCA allows a minimum of 3 months after an interment before including a respondent in the sample population. The survey information provides a gauge to assess maintenance conditions at individual cemeteries as well as the overall system. NCA analyzes the information to ensure that we address those issues most important to our customers. This approach provides data from the customer's perspective, which are critical to developing our objectives and associated measures. The measure for cemetery appearance is the percent of respondents who agree or strongly agree that the overall appearance of the national cemetery is excellent.

VA headquarters staff oversees the data collection process and provides an annual report at the national level. MSN and cemetery level reports are provided for NCA management's use. The mail-out survey provides statistically valid performance information at the national and MSN levels and at the cemetery level for cemeteries having at least 400 interments per year.